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Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development and the twenty-fourth special session of the General Assembly: review of relevant United Nations plans and programmes of action pertaining to the situation of social groups: equalization of opportunities for persons with disabilities

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The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 25 July 1996.

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Introduction: "Focus on the Disabled: Challenges, Perspectives, Priorities and Opportunities"

An integral part of the mandate of Social Development is the "silent sector" — those who often do not, or cannot, speak for themselves — the disabled. Frequently overlooked, shunned, ignored or discriminated against, disabled people are deserving of the world's fair-minded attention and the same access to human rights and dignity that everyone else is accorded. The building of a better climate of existence in all areas is a mandate of non-governmental organizations, who are in a key position to bring together the public sector, governments, business interests and individual donors to form a partnership on behalf of the handicapped.

Facts to face:

- Tens of millions have disabilities that affect their minds and bodies, ranging in intensity from arrested childhood development and poor learning abilities to chronic illness, speech and hearing impairment, to blindness and the inability to walk.

- Close to 70 of the disabled in the United States are unemployed, further adding to their sense of worthlessness in the human plan.

- A quarter-million Americans are victims of multiple sclerosis (MS), a progressive, intermitting disease with no cure.

- HIV/AIDS patients now number around 40 million globally.

- Countless numbers of babies are born annually with birth defects, often to drug-addicted mothers. Thousands more are born each year to mothers without pre-natal care, further compromising the infants' health and making it prone to malaria, tuberculosis and other life-threatening diseases.

- Over 70 of aging Americans have some form of disability, with 39 requiring assistance in daily living.

- According to a Japanese senator who is herself wheelchair bound, there are 400 million disabled people in the Asia-Pacific region, of whom 160 million are suffering from severe poverty.

Challenges:

- Identify the disabled, often a difficult task since in many places they still hide behind closed doors, many times at their own wish, unwilling to face yet another experience of public pity, shunning, or feelings of inadequacy.

- Determine the degree of disability; introduce methodology to help overcome their fears and ensure their integration into society via medical and psychological care, education and skills development, and monitoring their progress.

- Strengthen local community, government and support systems.

- Create handicapped-friendly workplace environments and recreational facilities.

- Strategize to reduce barriers that limited the handicapped, expressed by ignorance, injustice and even involuntary exclusion.

- While public awareness of the plight of the disabled has progressed tremendously in the past two decades, there is still a long way to go to insure their acceptance as viable members of society. Strategizing on how to accomplish this goal is a major priority. Involving the media in specific instances may be productive.

Perspectives:

- Focus on current causes of people's disabilities and make a concentrated effort to minimize their disastrous effects: landmines, catastrophic industrial accidents; various forms of abuse; germ-based occurrences; birth defects; untreated early-life diseases; occupational hazards; the use of illegal weapons; domestic accidents; and more.

- Realize that the disabled have a comer on vulnerability, with little or no mobility, limited access to services, difficulty in transportation, discrimination or patronizing attitudes in the job market, all of which serve to lessen their hopes of rehabilitation.

- Develop an awareness of the problems of the disabled by transferring the focus from their handicaps to their assets and abilities, to add to the quality of life around them. (And often, to the economy.)

Priorities:

- Make available to the handicapped the assurance of their right to human security and dignity as proclaimed by Secretary-General Kofi Annan in his opening-day address to the 56th Annual DPVNGO Conference in New York.

- Encourage tolerance and a spirit of welcome by providing access to education, special job- training skills, information on new developments in medical technology, therapies and industrial workshops. Involve families, advocates, caregivers, institutions and the public sector as well as the patients themselves in this "sharing" experience. Coordinated partnerships like these can do much to enhance the opportunities for returning to a sense of normalcy for disabled persons. Monitoring these efforts should be a high priority with top- level supervision and contact with the disabled, instead of relegating these duties to the newest low-level person in the system who may have the best of intentions but little experience or expertise in working with the handicapped.

- Develop viable employment initiatives to return the disabled to the work force in some of the many areas where their efforts and talents have proven successful: computer technology, writing, art, musical performance, composition or direction, teaching, science, and more, so that they may become self-sufficient and acquire a sense of self-worth.

- Involve civic-minded institutions and generous benefactors in a campaign to support the basic requirements of the disabled with attainable goals by assisting governments and the private sector in providing curb-cuts, ramps, lifts, to facilitate entrance to buildings, banks, healthcare providers, offices and other public places.

- Encourage support of the UN Commission on Human Rights and work to strengthen its effectiveness.

- Be mindful of the differences location makes — what is a life-saving necessity for a disabled person in a least-developed country may be just an extra perquisite for a similarly- affected person in a major metropolis.

- Support the enactment of laws that protect the welfare and well-being of persons afflicted with disabilities, and monitor their implementation, and their affect on the disabled within our own areas.

- Cultivate a culture of caring concern for the disabled. Try to anticipate their needs, unobtrusively. Consider them valued friends, not objects of pity. Acknowledge their talents as well as their needs. It's not just an act of kindness — it's a human obligation.

Opportunities:

- Take advantage of the disabled persons' own abilities and involve them in planning the proposed improvements in their lifestyle. Bring their knowledge and ideas together with those of the other members of the partnership — governments, healthcare providers, family members, financial benefactors and others for the best possible results.

- Promote the concept of a sympathetic, credible profile of the disabled and the advantages of assimilating them into the life of the community.

- Arrange local events, workshops, panel discussions and seminars featuring the "disabled but able", highlighting their successes and providing examples of how they worked to overcome their problems and disadvantages, with the help of society and their own sheer determination.

- Establish "twinning" plans with other similarly-situated groups to share experiences, strategies and efforts, either on a local, or far-ranging level.

- In business, suggest creating a recognition plan for rewarding employers who hire the handicapped, and bring media attention to the success of the plan and the people involved.

- Consider the possibility of an annual special sports event just for the handicapped, involving important sports figures as role models for the young athletes. Apprise the media of the plans well in advance. An accomplishment won here will go a long way to build self- confidence and plant the seeds of empowerment in a young handicapped person who has years ahead to cope with his or her disability.

Finally —

Welcome the disabled into the mainstream of life just as enthusiastically as you would any new friend. Be as helpful as you can. Offer information. Answer questions. Try to anticipate their immediate needs. Develop a sensitivity to them, and realize that a situation that may be perfectly normal to most people may very well present an almost- insurmountable problem to them. (And that they may not want to talk about it.) Help them to keep apprised of the newest developments in legislation, medicine, therapies and everyday situations that may smooth their already-difficult way in the world. But most of all, help them to develop and maintain a sense of self-worth that is their human right.

Recommendation:

For the public sector to function more effectively, it is essential that it reaffirm and strengthen its commitment to the partnership process by which the disabled may achieve their goal —the hope of a better future.